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Chapter 1

THE JÍVARO: BACKGROUND

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I say truly to Your Highnesses that these people are the most insolent that I have seen in all the time that I have traveled in the Indies and engaged in their conquest.

Captain Hernando de Benavente —on the Jívaro in a letter to the Royal Audiencia *of Spain, March 25, 1550*[1]

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Where the westward-drifting cloud cover of the upper Amazon basin collides with the eastern cordillera of the Ecuadorian Andes, cold rivulets cascade into the misty forests to form swift, growing streams descending towards the Atlantic Ocean, a continent away. Where the mountain waterfalls give way to rapids, the country of the *untsuri šuarā*, the Jívaro, begins; and where the rapids finally end in placid meandering rivers, so does their homeland. Downstream from the rapids live their traditional enemies, the *ačuarā šuarā* and the *tsumu šuarā*, Indians who travel more by canoe than on foot. But the rapids are more than a geophysical feature; they are a protective barrier that has long halted exploitative penetration of the Jívaro country from the navigable river systems of the rest of the Amazon basin to the east. And the escarpment of the Andes, to their west, which is the most abrupt in all the length of South America, has similarly been an old and silent ally in inhibiting successful conquest and colonization from the highlands. This then, is the home of the Jívaro, a wet, mountainous, and heavily forested sanctuary which helped preserve the freedom and

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